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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000381

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP; EEB/ESC; DRL  
DEPARTMENT PLS PASS TO USTR FOR CHRIS WILSON  
USDOC PASS TO RIYADH, JEDDAH, DHAHRAN

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: ALLEGATIONS OF VOTE BUYING AND SORCERY ON EVE OF JEDDAH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ELECTIONS

REF: A. JEDDAH 0297  
[B.](#) JEDDAH 0359

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

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[¶](#)1. (C) In the final week before elections for the Board of Directors of the influential Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), candidates accused each other of buying votes and expressed mixed feelings about the new election procedures imposed by the Minister of Commerce and Industry. All agreed that the new rules -- which allow Chamber members to vote for just one of the 67 candidates for the 12 elected seats -- have disadvantaged women, who were first elected in 2005 on slates with influential men, and opened the doors to younger and less affluent candidates -- including religious hard-liners and tribal members. Reformists, working independently and competing for the same voters, predicted that well-organized religious conservatives, headed by a hard-line member of the Jeddah city council, plan to reverse JCCI initiatives to support women's participation in the economy. Several female challengers told us it is vital that women remain on the JCCI board, even if they themselves lose.

Candidates worried this election system -- while perhaps breaking the previous domination of the largest, wealthiest trading families who ignored smaller businesses -- will produce a deeply divided and ineffectual board. This may be, as one candidate suggested, a deliberate attempt by the Minister of Commerce and Industry to weaken and control the JCCI, a powerful independent force in trade-oriented Jeddah and a trend-setter in the Kingdom. End summary and comment.

Election procedures handicap women . . .

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[¶](#)2. (C) In separate meetings, male and female candidates for the JCCI board of directors commented to poloff that election procedures instituted by the Minister of Commerce and Industry Abdullah Zainal Alireza have disadvantaged women, who currently occupy four of the 18 seats on the board. In the ground-breaking 2005 JCCI board election, the first Saudi election permitting female candidates, women won two of the twelve elected seats by running on slates with influential

men from Jeddah's leading merchant families. The Minister of Commerce, who appoints six of the 18 members, subsequently named two more women to the board in 2005. This year, the new Minister (Zainal Alireza) abolished election tickets and allowed each JCCI member to vote for one person, rather than ¶12. Alireza confided his opinion that the past practice of electoral slates/blocs had resulted in "inappropriate people" being elected at some chambers, but expressed his qualified support for women candidates and board members in cities "where society is ready" (ref A). JCCI candidates still believe Minister Alireza will only appoint as many women as are elected by the membership. Several female candidates commented that even if they themselves did not win, it is essential that women remain on the board -- so that the advances achieved are not lost. They have strong fears that the election may produce a retrograde JCCI board.

¶13. (U) As before, men and women must vote on separate days, with women having just one day to vote and men four days. A female voter may send a male guardian or business representative to vote on her behalf on the male voting days. Female candidates -- who must win male votes to get elected -- requested the right to be present in the candidates' area at the polls on the male voting days, but their request was rejected. Instead, they may designate men, such as their brothers and sons, to represent them on those days. Some candidates are circumventing these restrictions by renting space next door to the JCCI building (for \$20,000/space) and meeting prospective voters there.

. . . but open doors to young and less prominent candidates

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¶14. (C) Newspaper articles have noted the absence of the very top business families -- who historically dominated the JCCI -- from the current board elections, and the prevalence of candidates younger than 37. Candidates agreed that the new procedures encouraged younger and less prominent business people to run, and discouraged older and very wealthy business people -- who were afraid to risk the embarrassment of losing. A female challenger from a prominent family complained that the new rules opened the doors to "the takers" who are interested in profiting from board membership; the old rules encouraged wealthy, well-established candidates who didn't need more money and wanted to "give back" to the community. One 30-something challenger explained that he decided to run because the JCCI, dominated by the wealthiest families and largest companies, ignored entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises like his. Since he is young, losing the election would not be a great dishonor. Some candidates speculated that the Minister banned election slates to break the stranglehold of the wealthiest companies on the JCCI. It is unclear what role these top businesses are playing behind the scenes. One challenger alleged that two leading families currently on the board are supporting an incumbent running for reelection so they will "have their man on the board."

and religious conservatives and Bedouins

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¶15. (C) The new campaign procedures have also empowered religious hard-liners and tribal representatives. According to informed observers, several candidates, members of large tribes, are likely to be elected because of their tribal affiliation. One candidate, for example, has 44 brothers. Religious hard-liners are united behind their candidates, and seem likely to come to the polls. The conservative standard bearer Bassam Al Akhdar, a member of the Jeddah municipal council but not known as a businessman, was elected to the city council as part of the "Golden List" of religiously approved hard-line candidates. He and other conservatives

refused to meet with the our econoff last year because she was a woman. Several women in the JCCI fear conservatives are seeking board seats to roll back the gains made by women.

The current board supported women and men working together at the JCCI -- a breakthrough in Saudi Arabia. Conservatives have allegedly signed an agreement to banish female JCCI employees to a separate building. The conservative candidates have refused to speak with female candidates or attend meetings with them to discuss election issues, such as to select election observers. Progressive candidates are divided and competing against each other for the same voters and their mutual friends may not want to antagonize any of them by voting. Several said that because Saudi Arabia "doesn't have a culture of elections" their friends are less likely to come to the polls, not understanding the importance of their vote. One candidate joked that the conservatives, motivated by religion, are likely to say the morning prayer together, then march to polls.

Campaign techniques: From allegations of vote buying

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and sorcery to Facebook and SMS

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¶6. (C) Candidates have used a variety of techniques, both time-tested and new, to win votes. Ministry regulations prohibit candidates from advertising or promoting themselves in the media, although they may speak about the election in general to the press, which has covered the election intensively. To reach voters, candidates have turned to social media, such as Facebook, and sent thousands of messages (including Eid greetings) by fax, email, and SMS. Several candidates complained that others were buying votes. One challenger said that when she presented her campaign brochure to a prospective voter the businessman opened it and asked, "Where's the money?" Another told us that his competitors are hiring brokers who promise to provide a certain number of votes, but he suspected that the brokers could not deliver. More privately there has been some negative campaigning, for example with one married female

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challenger disparaged for being romantically involved with her male business partner, and a male incumbent accused of "sorcery" and not being a true, ethnic Saudi. (See ref b, para 3.)

¶7. (C) Candidates expressed confidence that votes will be counted and reported accurately. Candidates voted on election observers. The JCCI has purchased voting machines from the United States, and vote results will be publicly displayed.

Why the JCCI election matters

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¶8. (C) Comment. Jeddah's vibrant commercial sector represents 40 percent of trade in the Kingdom. The JCCI, which has 40,000 active members, is a large and progressive organization viewed as a model and trend-setter for the Kingdom. The previous electoral system, according to candidates and JCCI staff members, produced a united, activist board ready to take decisive action from its first day. That board, and the progressive JCCI leader ousted last year by the Minister of Commerce, supported women's entry into the economy, providing a model for Saudi Arabia. The new procedures seem likely to produce a fragmented and ineffectual board consisting of religious hard-liners, Bedouins, and a few progressives unable to agree on a shared agenda. The word around Jeddah is that the procedural change seems designed by the Minister of Commerce to ensure the JCCI, which had represented an independent power center in Jeddah, can no longer influence and challenge government policies. In essence, divide and conquer. End Comment.

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